

CHRISTIANITY IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ELIOT

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## INTRODUCTION

From 1857 through 1876 George Eliot wrote eight novels. Her career in fiction, which began when she had reached the age of thirty-nine, was preceded by her translation of two works on rationalistic Christianity, David Friedrich Strauss' Leben Jesu and Ludwig Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christentums. Encouragement from George Henry Lewes stimulated her fictional writing, and with this she remained actively engaged throughout Lewes' life.

George Eliot's career presents an enigma, not only because while on the one hand she was educated within a strict Evangelical atmosphere, on the other hand she developed concepts which have often been considered agnostic tendencies; but also because while on the one hand she adamantly extolled in her novels the Good Life, the life guided by a creed of moral responsibility, on the other hand she formed a union with Lewes which was unsanctioned by Church and State.

The purpose of this report is to analyze the writings of George Eliot from the standpoint of the Christian concepts expressed therein in an attempt to prove that in spite of her rejection of Christian dogma, she remained a Christian, and that her writings have a positive Christian influence. Since the value of her poems seems to lie in the charm of their narration rather than in their moral intent, they have been omitted from the study.

The George Eliot Letters, the editing of which was completed by Gordon S. Haight in 1954, have been invaluable in correlating

the mind of George Eliot, the individual, with that revealed in her novels.

Acknowledgment is made to Dr. Earle Davis, Head of the Kansas State University English Department, who suggested the topic for this report and who stimulated an earlier interest in George Eliot aroused by Mrs. Natalie Calderwood of the University of Kansas English Department. In addition, my gratitude is extended to Dr. William Hummel for technical advice which he proffered while the report was in progress.

#### PRELUDE TO THE NOVELS

George Eliot was once accused of admiring "drab, negative sort of virtues ... school-teachers' virtues ..." and was pictured with "lists of good and bad conduct marks pinned neatly to her desk."<sup>1</sup> This description merely presents her as the prototype of the Victorian novelists -- the proponent of the Puritan heritage from England's past. Notwithstanding her relationship with George Henry Lewes, it has been customary to portray Eliot in much this fashion -- that is, as the writer of moralistic pieces. As proof of this as an enduring practice, even among her staunch admirers, one need not go further back than Dr. Frank Leavis' noteworthy work The Great Tradition, in which he states that the enlightened person of today must forget his dislike for Puritanism when he reads George Eliot.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation (New York, 1935), p. 327.

<sup>2</sup>(London, 1948), p. 13.

It is true that George Eliot's early life might have influenced her to become the stereotyped nineteenth century Puritan, but one must remember that she did not write her first fictional work (Scenes of Clerical Life) until she had reached a mature age. By this time, the Marian Evans who had been born into a middle-class Evangelical family and who had been formally educated first in a Calvinistic school and then in an equally rigid Baptist boarding school had become the intellectual companion of such personages as the literary critic George Henry Lewes and the philosopher Herbert Spencer.

It is tenable, as Joan Bennett points out, that moral earnestness and intellectual consistency were both native to her and that the moral outlook of her early teachers dominated her life up until the age of twenty.<sup>3</sup> But the young devotee of Evangelical Christianity who could in 1840 write, "How blessed that we are not left like the heathen to grope our way to a twilight of knowledge, but may be at once introduced to the clear sunshine of the full assurance of understanding of the study of Divine revelation" was within a matter of months -- months in which she probed into literature and into the depths of her own being as well -- to inform her father that she regarded the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as "histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction."<sup>4</sup> Apparently, her scepticism was initiated by her association with Charles and Sara Hennell and

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<sup>3</sup>George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art (London, 1948), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (Binghamton, New York, 1954), vol. I, pp. 49-50 and p. 128.

her subsequent interest in Hennell's book, Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity, which was intended to show that Christianity can be explained by purely natural causes.<sup>5</sup>

Even then, although sympathetic toward Hennell's thesis, George Eliot in a characteristically idealistic fashion modified her own statements by acknowledging her admiration for and cherishing of the moral teachings of Jesus. To her, only the system of doctrines built upon the facts of His life was just then "pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness."<sup>6</sup> It may be that the teaching of such free-thinkers as Isaac Taylor, who in his Ancient Christianity and the Doctrines of the Oxford Tracts, in his efforts to guide his readers to the Bible as the inspiration to right living by demonstrating the corruption of the Church Fathers and the early Church, led her to question the teachings of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

It was inevitable that the searching young woman would continue to delve into the history of the Christian faith and its meaning to humanity. To advance her study, she mastered the German which eventually led to her translation of two post-Hegelian works on rational Christianity, D. F. Strauss' Leben Jesu (1848) and Ludwig Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christentums (1854).

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<sup>5</sup>Leslie Stephen, George Eliot (New York, 1902), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Letters, vol. I, p. 128.

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence and Elizabeth Hanson, Marian Evans and George Eliot, a Biography (London, 1952), pp. 39-40.

As for the Strauss work, while in his introduction he claims that science demands a reexamination of the life of Jesus not as supernatural history (for this has already, he states, been rejected by the rationalists) but as history itself, he is careful to point out that the essence of Christian faith is "perfectly independent of his criticism."<sup>8</sup> Strauss rejects Jesus as the Son of God while acknowledging him as a wise and virtuous human being capable not of miracles, but of acts of benevolence and friendship, "sometimes of medical skill, sometimes also the results of accident and good fortune."<sup>9</sup>

Part One of the Strauss work considers the history of the birth and childhood of Jesus as related in the genealogical tables of the Synoptic Gospels, noting contradictions therein, and avers that His miraculous conception is based on vague pre-suppositions. In Part Two, the miracles of Jesus are dismissed one by one with the statement that the first four books of the New Testament report these instances because the Jewish people expected miracles of the Messiah.<sup>10</sup> The transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain raises an objection to the anthropomorphic conception of a Divine Being with audible speech. Part Three, on the history of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, states that the disciples and the authors of the New Testament, blinded by their enthusiasm, resorted to mythopoeism as they

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<sup>8</sup>D. F. Strauss, Leben Jesu (The Life of Jesus Critically Examined), trans. George Eliot (London, 1848), p. xxx.

<sup>9</sup>Strauss, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>Strauss, p. 413.

"lay hold on supports which have long been broken, and which can no longer be made tenable by the most zealous efforts of an exegesis which is behind the age."<sup>11</sup> Again, discrepancies among the gospels are cited. The concluding dissertation avers that although the most firmly believing Christians repress unbelief, still they have it; the believer as well as the unbeliever is intrinsically a sceptic. But Christianity is praised as the "sublimest" of all religions, since it is "identical with the deepest philosophical truths."<sup>12</sup> Finally, Strauss states that it is humanity that dies, rises, and ascends to heaven; in this lies man's spiritual life. By faith in this Christ, the human mind achieves the absolute.

It would seem that George Eliot must have been enthusiastic about such straightforward writing: a few years previous to accepting the translating of Leben Jesu, she had written to her friend Sara Hennell:

But it may be said, how are we to do anything toward the advancement of mankind? Are we to go on cherishing superstitions out of a fear that seems inconsistent with any faith in a Supreme Being? I think the best and the only way of fulfilling our mission is to sow good seed in good, i.e., prepared ground, and not to root up tares where we must inevitably gather all the wheat with them. We cannot fight and struggle enough for freedom of enquiry and we need not be idle in imparting all that is pure and lovely to children whose minds are unbespoken. Those who can write, let them do it as boldly as they like, and let no one hesitate at proper seasons to make a full confession (far better than profession).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Strauss, p. 582.

<sup>12</sup> Strauss, p. 757.

<sup>13</sup> Letters, vol. I, p. 163.



Still, the work of Strauss at some points seemed brutal to the sensitive spirit of George Eliot, and she showed reluctance to relinquish orthodox Christianity as she wrote in 1844, "I am relapsing into heathen darkness about everything but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Heaven has sent 'leanness into my soul' for reviling them I suppose."<sup>14</sup> Before the completion of her work she vowed that she was "Strauss-sick" over the "dissecting of the beautiful story of the crucifixion" from which her body and mind had recoiled and openly declared that in many cases she did not agree with Strauss.<sup>15</sup>

The second assignment in translation was apparently more to Eliot's liking, for she stated that with the ideas of Feuerbach she everywhere agreed, and that the proofreading of her translation was really a pleasure because of "what there is of truth and beauty in the book."<sup>16</sup> This humanistic work, accepting the age-old principle of Protagoras that "of all things man is the measure," states emphatically in the introduction that "the divine being is nothing else than the human being ... purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective, i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being."<sup>17</sup> This is Feuerbach's explanation for anthropomorphism.

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<sup>14</sup>Letters, vol. I, p. 182.

<sup>15</sup>Letters, vol. I, p. 203 and pp. 206-207.

<sup>16</sup>Letters, vol. II, pp. 153 and 155.

<sup>17</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity), trans. Marian Evans (New York, 1957), p. 14. This book was first translated into English in 1854.

In Part One of his thesis, Feuerbach attempts to transform and dissolve theology into anthropology. God is a "need of the intelligence, a necessary thought -- the highest degree of the thinking power," and the measurement of God is a measure of a man's understanding.<sup>18</sup> Between the divine and the human, there is a middle term -- Love, and Love is God himself, apart from which there is no God. It is Love that makes man God and God man.<sup>19</sup> Feuerbach sums up this concept in the statement that the beginning, middle, and end of religion is Man.<sup>20</sup> In Part Two, Feuerbach takes up what he calls "the false and theological essence of religion," in which the fear of hell is said not to appeal to reason but to the emotions. Each of the sacraments is resolved into a basic need of man. Probably Feuerbach's most memorable notion is the following:

Christ, as the consciousness of love, is the consciousness of the species. We are all one in Christ. Christ is the consciousness of our identity. He therefore who loves man for the sake of man, who rises to love of the species, to universal love ... he is Christian, is Christ himself. He does what Christ did, what made Christ Christ.<sup>21</sup>

The Strauss as well as the Feuerbach influence probably prompted George Eliot to state: "It seems to me the soul of Christianity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the melting-point and

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<sup>18</sup>Feuerbach, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>Feuerbach, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup>Feuerbach, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup>Feuerbach, p. 269.

the new starting-point."<sup>22</sup>

Eliot pursued the intellectual life by writing and editing for the Westminster Review. This endeavor led to her union with George Henry Lewes. Her novel-writing ensued from this point onward.

Having surveyed the intellectual and spiritual influences in Eliot's life which preceded them, we are now prepared to look into the novels discretely in order to determine how Christian concepts figure in them and what conclusions can be thereby drawn.

#### HUMAN FELLOWSHIP

At the very core of Christianity lie the words of the Second Commandment. A supplement to this is the following: "Let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed." (I John 3:18.) The love of man for his fellowman to George Eliot is supreme, and by love all of humanity is blended together. She believes man must "love what is good for mankind and hate what is evil for mankind."<sup>23</sup> An unforgettable example of this postulate is Mr. Jerome in Janet's Repentance (Scenes of Clerical Life), who often eats his dinner sparingly, "oppressed by the thought that there were men, women, and children with no dinner to sit down to," and who goes about in the afternoon looking for some poor soul whom he might help. When he complains

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<sup>22</sup>Letters, vol. IV, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup>Letters, vol. V, p. 31.

of her being reckless with the candle-ends, the maid may think him stingy, but Mr. Jerome's charity is such that his chief sorrow is "that any living being should want"; his next is "that anyrational being should waste" (I, 148-149).<sup>24</sup>

In Adam Bede, in anticipation of Adam's discovery of his adored Hetty's affair with Donnithorne, Eliot declares: "We are children of a large family and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of -- to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more" (II, 5). Later in the same novel, the preacher Mr. Irwine, in conversation with Adam on the eve of Hetty's trial, expresses the unity of mankind with these words: "Men's lives are as thoroughly blended with each other as the air they breathe..." (II, 125).

To Mr. Gilfil and to Mr. Irwine and to Dinah Morris, Christian brotherhood is as natural as living; to Silas Marner, it returns at the end of an extended period of withdrawal from human affection and is realized by the love which he sees before him, the love between the child and the world. It is only when his love is perfected that his money is returned to him.<sup>25</sup> Unforgettable is the vivid brotherhood, symbolic perhaps of all mankind, in the final embrace of Maggie and Tom Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss. In fact, all the suffering of the Tullivers

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<sup>24</sup>Citations from the novels are to the Cabinet Edition of The Works of George Eliot, 24 vols. (Edinburgh and London, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup>Robert Speaight, George Eliot (London, 1954), p. 64.

is representative, it seems, of "hundreds of obscure hearths" (XVIII, 6).

A keen sense of human fellowship is brought home to the reader in the Proem of the historical novel Romola, in which Eliot describes a "world-famous city ... seeming to stand as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them..." (XIX, 2). Although she has been criticized many times over for putting the people of Middlemarch, so to speak, into a late nineteenth-century Florentine setting, the strength of human fellowship in Eliot's vision of life possibly hinders her from doing otherwise. The theme is strongly voiced through the words of the historical monk Savonarola and the fictitious character Dino (Romola's brother). Savonarola has in common with the greatest of mankind, in the words of Eliot, "that fervid piety, that passionate sense of the infinite, that active sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish interests to the general good" (XIX, 359). In gazing upon the monk's face, Romola sees simple human fellowship expressing itself as a "strongly felt bond." Eliot states that such a glance is half the vocation of the priest or spiritual guide of men (XX, 101-102). To assist Romola to rise above her own misery and despair, Savonarola advises her to make her sorrow an offering so that she may behold the need of her fellowman by the light of the "fire of Divine charity" which will then burn within her (XX, 106). These words reinforce for Romola the dying message of her priest-brother Dino, who has lamented over the fact

that Bardo, their paganistic father, has lived amidst human misery without believing in it: "He has been like one busy picking shining stones in a mine, while there was a world dying of plague about him" (XIX, 236).

Felix Holt, the Radical, has a feeling of fellowship for the working man, and in spite of his education, he labors beside the lowly and tries to inspire them with a desire for the education which he sees as their only hope to rise politically and socially. The same benevolent spirit is pictured in Caleb Garth of Middlemarch, who loves his work so much he works without remuneration.

Tertius Lydgate, in spite of the demands of his scientific study, is portrayed as a creature with a "flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship." One of the principal attractions which his profession holds for him is that it is in need of reform. Thus he plans his strategy -- "to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (XIV, 225). Lydgate has in this respect a female counterpart in Middlemarch -- Dorothea Brook, who is alive to anything that gives her an "opportunity for active sympathy" (XIV, 312), and who idealistically plans improvements on her uncle's cottages as a boon to their inhabitants.

The title character of Daniel Deronda wants, like Dorothea Brooke, to take care of the person less able to take care of himself and thus learn "how miseries are wrought." With a spirit of self-sacrifice, he has a strong desire to know the other person's point of view. On visiting the Jewish Tabernacle for the first time, Daniel observes a blending of humanity: the

various "queer-looking Israelites" are "just distinguishable from queer-looking Christians of the same mixed morale" (IV, 135).

As Daniel's life becomes enmeshed with that of Gwendolyn Harleth, he advises her in his selflessness to look on other lives besides her own: "See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires" (IV, 258). Deronda with his deep sense of human fellowship finally lures Gwendolyn away from her egoism so that she sees her own need clearly.

An effort has been made to parallel Feuerbach's idea that it is Love that makes man God and God man (the "Lehre der Liebe") to certain of Eliot's characters. "Romola ... die belehrt wird in ihrem Unglück Trost zu suchen in der werktätigen Liebe zu ihren Mitmenschen.... Nach diesen Prinzipien lehrt und handelt auch Dinah Morris, die Methodistenpredigerin."<sup>26</sup> The concept of love for fellowman, expressed not only by word but also by deed, is propounded by Eliot in each of her novels. Moreover, her own sense of fellowship prompts her compassion for the human lot.

#### THE HUMAN CONSCIENCE

"And herein do I endeavor to have always a conscience; without offense towards God and towards men." (Acts 24:16.) George Eliot's moral consciousness leads her to stress that power by which man stands apart from all other manifestations of life -- the human conscience. As E. A. Baker so aptly states, "she

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<sup>26</sup>Sibilla Pfeiffer, George Eliots Beziehung zu Deutschland (Heidelberg, 1925), p. 254.

believed in the spirituality of life, in the intrinsic value of personality and the sovereign importance of events which take place in the inner consciousness."<sup>27</sup> In The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton (Scenes of Clerical Life), the novelist declares that "these commonplace people -- many of them -- bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows and their sacred joys" (XXI, 67). Arthur Donnithorne, in Adam Bede, has severe twinges of conscience: through this device nature has taken care that he will be "perpetually harassed by assaults from the other side of the boundary" (I, 186). In Arthur's vacillation between the desire to confess his youthful transgression and his attempts to vitiate his conscience by self-soothing arguments, the reader is made to see the impact of this innermost and most secret feature of man.

Maggie Tulliver of The Mill on the Floss, in her groping for the meaning of life, has searched her conscience after her adventure with Stephen Guest in the hope that she will find expiation for the painfulness which she has inflicted upon the faithful Lucy and the doting Philip. But then, as Eliot states, the question as to whether or not an individual must "accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master key that will fit all cases" (XVIII, 362). Yet there is a particular key that fits each lock -- the human conscience which is involved. As Cecil has shown, Eliot

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<sup>27</sup>The History of the English Novel: from the Brontes to Meredith (London, 1937), vol. VIII, p. 225.



invariably sees man, not in relation to some particular code of ideals, but in relation to his own private ideals.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the problem facing her characters is "the discovery of a mean point between complete self-repression and unchecked self-indulgence."<sup>29</sup>

In Romola, Tito's conscience never wins out; instead, his denial of Baldassarre leads to a struggle unto death. But Romola appeals to her conscience at the bidding of Savonarola, as he tells her that her dead pagan wisdom has left her "without a heart" and that a higher life awaits her when she accepts the religion of the Cross. Romola, accepting the spirit of the Christian concept of unselfishness, survives; Tito dies in disbelief. Or maybe it is simpler than this: the ultimate issue may be the degradation or elevation of the soul, and while good may be stronger in Romola, it may have succumbed to evil as stronger in Tito who refuses to listen to the inner voice.<sup>30</sup>

In Felix Holt, the Radical, Jermyn as a lawyer is described by Eliot as not likely to have a "conscience without balm" because he is in a profession in which circumstances may urge a man to overstep the line where his knowledge makes him "aware that (with discovery) disgrace is likely to begin" (VII, 327). Somehow, Mrs. Transome, wallowing in self-pity at her declining years and her passing into oblivion, seems devoid of conscience, which at least plagues Jermyn; instead of searching her own soul,

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<sup>28</sup>Early Victorian Novelists, pp. 299 and 310.

<sup>29</sup>George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup>Marjory A. Bald, Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1963), p. 198.

she seeks pity from others.

The conscience of the virtuous Mary Garth in Middlemarch will not permit her to bring Peter Featherstone the will which he wishes to reinstate in place of a second one; she feels an obligation to be neutral in the issue, even though she knows that by stepping over to Peter's iron chest and opening it, she will permit her lover, Fred Vincy, to inherit a fortune. Again, her conscience tells her to discourage Fred's entering the ministry; she knows this is not his appointed role in life. On the other hand, Fred struggles with his conscience -- he sees himself as robbing two women of their savings (Mrs. Garth and Mary), and he is ashamed of being forced to ask his uncle Bulstrode for money.

But the outstanding portrayal of a conscience at work in Middlemarch is in the case of Bulstrode. In order to salve his conscience, the Middlemarch banker, after going through years of spiritual torment, attempts to "gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God" (XXII, 235). He is described as going through "spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives and make clear to himself what God's glory required" (XXII, 235). The Eliot reader is likely to regard him with more compassion than contempt: as Leavis says, we feel his "agonized twists and turns" too fully not to sympathize.<sup>31</sup> Bulstrode cannot quite convince himself that his misdeeds in the past have not been at least "half sanctified by the

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<sup>31</sup>The Great Tradition, p. 70.

singleness of his desire to devote himself and all he possessed to the furtherance of the divine scheme" (XV, 385). He attempts his own definition of sin and doctrine and hopes through private humiliation to be relieved of the stigma of the sin which he thinks of only as questionable conformity to lax customs.

As he sits beside the bed of the dying Raffles, his mind is intensely at work:

... thinking of what he had to guard against and what would win him security. Whatever prayers he might lift up, whatever statements he might inwardly make of this man's wretched spiritual condition, and the duty he himself was under to submit to the punishment divinely appointed for him rather than to wish for evil to another -- through all this effort to condense words into a solid mental state, there pierced and spread with irresistible vividness the images of the events he desired. And in the train of those images of the events he could not but see the death of Raffles, and see in it his own deliverance. What was the removal of this wretched creature? He was impenitent -- but were not public criminals impenitent? Yet the law decided their fate. Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue -- if he kept his hands from hastening it -- if he scrupulously did what was prescribed (XVI, 262-263).

Thus can Eliot dramatically reveal "all the complex writhings of a spirit striving to make itself at ease on the bed of conscience."<sup>32</sup>

When the crisis for Bulstrode comes, he tries to convince himself that he is at peace -- his conscience has been protected by "the enfolding wing of secrecy, which seemed just then like an angel sent down for his relief" (XVI, 272). But the truth will out, and Bulstrode's little game of secrecy is ended. His hypocrisy wreaks its havoc upon Middlemarch. However, although the merchants are scandalized, Mrs. Pymdale is careful to set them

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<sup>32</sup>Early Victorian Novelists, p. 319.

straight about the fact that they should not blame "people's bad actions" on their religion.

Gwendolyn Harleth, in Daniel Deronda, may be considered as a young Mrs. Transome in whom disaster forces a development of conscience.<sup>33</sup> She manages to convince herself that circumstances are driving her into marriage with Grandcourt, that the greatness of her mother's financial need is sufficient reason for her act; but her conscience is beset by a growing uneasiness that she is actually marrying for gratification of her own desire for luxury "which it would take a great deal of slow poisoning to kill" (IV, 116). She knows the pain she is inflicting on Mrs. Glasher and her four offspring but plans her future in attempted disregard of them. Once her bed is made, she must continue to lie in it, and although she is apparently virtuous by nature, she has failed in her struggle against temptation. When Daniel prompts her eventual realization that her selfishness is thwarting her life, Gwendolyn's conscience is at rest.

Thus are the workings of the human conscience displayed in Eliot's novels, with one which forces the individual to live the good life standing in relief against its opposite.

#### THE SACRAMENTS

Intimately related to affairs of the human conscience are the Christian concepts of confession and penance: "No, I say to you: but except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish."

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<sup>33</sup>The Great Tradition, p. 70.

(Luke 13:5.) For Eliot, for the conscience struggling in vain against the pressures of moral responsibility, there is just one panacea: the cleansing effected by a "fresh ear and a fresh heart." This kind of sacerdotalism appears often in George Eliot's novels.<sup>34</sup> Examples are far-reaching: they exist between Mr. Tryan and Janet, Mr. Irwine and Arthur Donnithorne, Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel, Maggie Tulliver and Dr. Kenn, Dolly Winthrop and Silas Marner, Felix Holt and Esther King, Romola and Savonarola, Dorothea and Lydgate, and Deronda and Gwendolyn. Following are Eliot's words for the phenomenon as taken from Janet's Repentance (Scenes): "In our moments of spiritual need, the man to whom we have no tie but our common nature seems nearer to us than mother, brother, or friend... " (XXII, 214).

In Adam Bede, the point is made obvious that if Mr. Irwine had not, in spite of a premonition, let the moment pass when Arthur would have confessed his betrayal of Hetty, her tragic abandonment of her infant child and her subsequent trial for murder could have been alleviated -- "how cruel it is to think how thin a film had shut out rescue from all this guilt and misery." Looking back, Mr. Irwine sees "the whole history now by that terrible illumination which the present sheds back upon the past" (II, 180). Of Hetty, the other sufferer in this dilemma, Dinah, once confession is consummated, says, "The pride of her heart has given way, and she leans on me for help" (II, 255). In The Mill on the Floss, Eliot bemoans the fact that "most of us, at some moment in our

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<sup>34</sup>Speaight, p. 27.

young lives, would have welcomed a priest of that natural order, in any sort of canonicals or uncanonicals," that is, of the order of Dr. Kenn, Maggie's confidants (XVIII, 264). As for Silas, the revelation of his past to Dolly occurs after Eppie has cast her charm upon the man. One might add that Godfrey Cass also confesses, but that his confession is of another sort -- a spurious one, since it is prompted by his selfish desire to claim Eppie as his daughter. A true confession in the eyes of Eliot is wrapped in unselfishness.

One feels that with Tito, as with Donnithorne, the only hope is in confession and penance, and Tito instead chooses to lead a life of lies; he makes cool deceit his "defensive armour." When Tito finally, in desperation, asks Baldassarre for forgiveness, the demented old man rejects him with finality. In contrast, Romola seeks refuge in the advice of Savonarola, and even in spite of the fall of her idol transcends the tragedy in her life.

Esther Lyon experiences through her conversations with Felix the cleansing effect which has not appeared in her life with her foster father. In fact, Eliot states that the vain young girl's "first religious experience" has come through Felix. But there is nevertheless a mutual spirit of the confessional between Rufus and the girl whom he has raised: he feels he should ask forgiveness for not telling her earlier of her true past, and she expresses the need for forgiveness for her egoism.

Again in Middlemarch, there is a mutuality of confession in the case of Lydgate and Dorothea: Dorothea makes an early appeal to Lydgate regarding the ailing Casaubon's critical need to

complete his work, The Key to all Mythologies. Eliot speaks of this as a "cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully-illuminated life" (XV, 27). Lydgate is bereft of words. However, much later, Lydgate confesses to Dorothea his involvement with Bulstrode, and Dorothea (another character who, like Deronda, seems at times almost too good to be lifelike) receives his words with her "ready understanding." It may be fitting that Lydgate at this point compares Dorothea to the Virgin Mary: she has largeness of heart, has heard his case, and has assumed the role of intercessor.<sup>35</sup>

With Gwendolyn's confession to Deronda, she appears to be cleansed and ready to think about a new life. She admits that she has made the loss of the Glashers her gain. But in this particular sacerdotal relationship, there is the painful feeling that without Deronda on hand, Gwendolyn will not be able to maintain a healthy attitude toward life.

Another of the traditional sacraments brought out in the Eliot novels is that of baptism. In Janet's Repentance (Scenes), adult baptism is personified as "struggling under a heavy load of debt" (XXII, 59). This apparently is one of the many allusions to those Christian practices in which to Eliot the spirit of the word and not the letter of the word is important. On this point she may have agreed with Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom baptism has "moral and physical curative virtues," since water naturally

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<sup>35</sup>Reva Stump, Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels (Seattle, 1959), p. 199.

purifies, but who states that baptism as a single act is "either an altogether useless and unmeaning institution or a superstitious one."<sup>36</sup>

The enlightened Mr. Irwine thinks the "custom of baptism" more important than its "doctrine." For Silas, Eppie's being baptized is of importance merely because this is the custom in Raveloe. Of course, Silas is swayed somewhat by Dolly, who thinks, in her sublime lack of knowledge of form in her own religion, that the act will do Eppie good. Silas' friend, Mr. Macey, accepts the practice of baptism even against odds, for he states: "As for the children as the Wise Woman charmed, I've been at the christening of 'em again and again, and they took the water just as well" (XXIII, 121).

The sacrament of marriage has its impact in the lives of characters throughout George Eliot's novels. The unrelenting devotion of Mrs. Barton, in spite of the interference of the Countess Czerlaski in the earlier domestic tranquility, is a lesson in patience. Mr. Gilfil's undying devotion to his Caterina and his marriage, coming barely in time for fulfillment before his loved one's death, make a tender love story. Again, Janet's hanging on to her marriage vows with Dempster, in spite of his abject cruelty to her, is a portrayal of a marriage which endures in spite of all odds. Also, there is the understanding conjugal love of Nancy Lammeter for Godfrey Cass, which passes successfully over the turbulent waters of Godfrey's revelation of the past. There

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<sup>36</sup>Feuerbach, pp. 275-276.



are the Poyzers and the Mosses and the Winthrops -- simple folk who are all of them fitting examples of the everlastingness of marriage. Associated with these examples is Mr. Mace's reminiscence of the "contrair' words" which the parson has stated in the wedding ceremony of the elder Lammeters, of which Mr. Macey ruminates that "it isn't the meanin', it's the glue" that counts. His conclusion is that "sure enough the wedding turned out all right"(XXIII, 76).

When Romola marries Tito, she foresees with the eyes of trusting youth a life of supreme happiness, in spite of Dino's dire prediction. She is instead plunged into an abyss from which death for one of the parties is the only escape. For Romola, discovery of Tito's transgression with and responsibility for the sublimely ignorant Tessa is no release from the bond, even though Romola foolishly attempts to run away. Savonarola's words to her are law: "But you chose the bond; and in wilfully breaking it -- I speak to you as a pagan, if the holy mystery of matrimony is not sacred to you -- you are breaking a pledge" (XX, 103). Marriage is a sacramental vow, from which none but God can release. The monk goes on to tell Romola that she may die daily by the crucifixion of selfish will.

The marriage of Gwendolyn and Grandcourt is a sham from the beginning -- both parties are aware of it. Grandcourt may have been involved in a truer alliance in the early years of his association with Mrs. Glasher in the eyes of Eliot, but he does not have the integrity to remain faithful to another human.

The subject of marriage has ever been a tedious one when mentioned in the same breath with the name of George Eliot because of her own unmarried state with Lewes. It seems that here again to Eliot it is the spirit and not the letter of the law that is important. Certainly, there were extenuating circumstances preventing the marriage of Eliot and Lewes, and Eliot declares in a letter:

Assuredly if here be any one subject on which I feel no levity it is that of marriage and the relation of the sexes -- if there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes.

... Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done -- they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner.

... That any unworldly, unsuperstitious person who is sufficiently acquainted with the realities of life can pronounce my relation to Mr. Lewes immoral I can only understand by remembering how subtle and complex are the influences that mould opinion....<sup>37</sup>

Feuerbach seems to have influenced Eliot on the marital status; he states that "marriage as the free bond of love is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage -- of love."<sup>38</sup> Certainly the Letters reveal a sincere and enduring relationship between Lewes and Eliot from their early days of financial hardships to the days after she had reached the pinnacle of success and had become his "Madonna."

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<sup>37</sup>Letters, vol. I, p. 213.

<sup>38</sup>Feuerbach, p. 270.

## CHURCH AND CLERGY

George Eliot does not dwell long or often upon the physical plants of churches or on the political workings of the ecclesiastic body -- for these the student of the Victorian era must turn to Anthony Trollope. However, in Amos Barton (Scenes) she speaks with nostalgia of the quaintnesses of Shepperton Church in the old days -- the rough stucco, the patched stained-glass windows, the tall dark panels behind which a child could hide during the Litany. Further, she reminisces that there were no hymn-books "in those days," but instead a slate proclaimed the next hymn (XXI, 4-6).

Occasionally, there is a comment on doctrine, as in Amos Barton the Oxford movement is described as "an intellectual movement ... felt from the golden head to the miry toes of the Establishment" (XXI, 44). Also, from time to time the distinction between High and Low Church doctrine inevitably creeps into the novels, although often this is not clear-cut.

Adam Bede does not sympathize with Evangelicalism when he says that religion is something else besides "notions." He reflects: "I began to see as all this weighing and shifting what this text means and that text means, and whether folks are saved all by God's grace, or whether there goes an ounce o' their own will to't, was no part o' real religion at all.... And I found it better for my soul to be humble before the mysteries o' God's dealings, and not to be making a clatter about what I could never understand" (I, 276). Eliot seems to be quietly praising above

any other of her characters this humble and unassuming character with his homespun opinions.

In The Mill on the Floss, the Dodsons are characterized as "dull men and women" in whom one sees "little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed"; yet with their hereditary customs to guide them, they are portrayed as a virtuous group. Eliot reports that as part of the Protestant population of Great Britain, they had only "the slightest tincture of theology.... If, in the maiden days of the Dodson sisters, their Bibles opened more easily at some parts than others, it was because of dried tulip-petals, which had been distributed quite impartially, without preference for the historical devotional or doctrinal" (XVIII, 7).

The ideal Church for Eliot is probably described by Reverend Kenn in The Mill on the Floss; he believes that the Church ought to represent the feeling of the community, every parish being a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual father. Also, Eliot may share his firm faith, even in the light of his often losing heart on observing the lack of fellowship among his own people, that the Ideal Church would come to pass. The true Christian spirit seems to shine clearly in Nancy Lammeter of Silas Marner, who has difficulty relating the words of the Scripture to her own simple life, but in whom the "spirit of rectitude and the sense of responsibility for the effect of her conduct on others" are strong elements (XXIII, 231).

Leslie Stephen has stated that "everybody has noticed how admirably George Eliot has portrayed certain phases of religious

feeling with which ... she had long ceased to sympathize, and that none of her minor characters are "more tenderly and lovingly touched than the old-fashioned parsons."<sup>39</sup> Among the ministers there is a bevy of contrasting figures, several of whom have already been referred to. In Amos Barton, in addition to the title character, to name a few, there are: Mr. Fellowes, who "once obtained a living by the persuasive charms of his conversation..."; Rev. Archibald Duke, who "takes the gloomiest view of mankind and its prospects"; Mr. Pugh, whose vanity consists of looking the part, that is, playing the role of village parson; and Rev. Martin Cleves, the ideal parish priest, who has the "wonderful art of preaching sermons which the wheelwright and blacksmith can understand" (XXI, 84-87).

Eliot states in Amos Barton (in fact, in her first chapter of fiction) that hers is "not a well-regulated mind: it has an occasional tenderness for all abuses; it lingers with a certain fondness over the days of nasal clerks and top-booted parsons" (XXI, 4). Certainly, only the most earnest observers in matters of religion would conclude, as does Eliot in Janet's Repentance that "religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments" (XXII, 162). Her ministers are testimonials to this statement, as are also her parishioners.

Mr. Gilfil is portrayed with compassion by Eliot: nevertheless, the reader sees him as lackadaisical about his duty.

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<sup>39</sup>Hours in a Library, 3 vols. (London, 1892), vol. III, p. 219.

He possesses "a large heap of short sermons, rather yellow and worn at the edges, from which he took two every Sunday, securing perfect impartiality in the selection by taking them as they came, without reference to topics" (XXI, 131). Yet we see him serving his place in Shepperton, probably because of making no unreasonable demands on the intellect and dealing little with deep spiritual doctrine, and thus being understood and accepted by his community. Not so the Reverend Tryan of Janet's Repentance, whom Dempster accuses of antinomianism and of cant (XXII, 47). But Eliot reveres Tryan, in fact, remarks on a resident rector of her own time who, as Tryan does, appeals to consciences and thereby enlarges his congregation.

In Adam Bede, there is the "large-hearted" Mr. Irwine, who is deeply interested in that "most winning and winsome of exhorters,"<sup>40</sup> Dinah Morris; uncritically, of her naturalness, Irwine says one might as well go and lecture the trees as her. Surprisingly, the incomparable Mrs. Poyser, with her remarkable insight into human nature, sees Mr. Irwine as just as natural: "It's like looking at a full crop o' wheat, or a pasture with a fine dairy o' cows in it; it makes you think the world's comfortable-like" (I, 137).

Reverend Stelling in The Mill on the Floss has the "true British determination to push his way in the world," as compared to Dr. Kenn, the middle-aged confessor of Maggie, "whom life has disciplined and consecrated to be the refuge and rescue of early

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<sup>40</sup>Andrew L. Drummond, The Churches in English Fiction (Leicester, 1950), p. 252.

stumblers and victims of self-despair" (XVIII, 264). Likewise, a comparison is drawn in Felix Holt between Reverend John Lingon, whose interests tend toward drinking, hunting, and cock-fighting, and Reverend Rufus Lyon, who has risen above the doubts of his early years and has lived a life of "religious study and fervor."

Mr. Farebrother of Middlemarch has his faults -- he is a "little lax" for a clergyman, collects "blue-bottles and moths" and even gambles at the card-table on occasion; when pitted against a "zealous able man," Mr. Tyke, in the contest for the chaplaincy of the hospital, Eliot shows Farebrother as the superior figure, chiefly because of his laxity. As Mr. Hawley says, "sick people can't bear so much praying and preaching" (XXII, 281). Again, there is a pitting of preacher against preacher in the mind of Peter Featherstone, who in his deciding which shall preach his burial sermon ruminates that Casaubon will not do, Featherstone having been obliged to sit through his morning sermons with a snarl as well as having to pay him a tithe for the lien on his land. The sportsman-clergyman, Mr. Cadwallader, is favored because he has had to ask the favor of fishing the trout stream which runs through Featherstone property.

Gwendolyn's uncle, the Reverend Gascoine, of Daniel Deronda, is somewhat colorless, but he is a gentleman, a good thing in a minister, according to Eliot. He has "no distinctively clerical lines in the face, no official reserve or ostentatious benignity of expression, no tricks of starchiness or of affected ease" (III, 39). His tone of thinking was "not the modern Anglican, but what he would have called sound English, free from nonsense: such

as became a man who looked at a national religion by daylight, and saw it in its relation to other things" (III, 40).

One can readily see that the outstanding feature in Eliot's most beloved ministers is not their acumen or their holiness but their sensitivity to human desires and needs. They are ordinary men with no particular qualifications in their favor other than a zest for life and a love for their fellowmen.

#### FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

The Christian teachings dictate that "without faith it is impossible to please God." (Heb. 11:6.) Eliot portrays the antinomian faith which to the Dissenter is all that is necessary for salvation. When Dinah Morris preaches, she speaks under the inspiration of her "own simple faith" and not as she has heard others preach. Maggie Tulliver, on the other hand, in her time of need finds her faith hidden among the words of the yellowed pages of the book which Bob Jakin gives her -- The Imitation of Life by Thomas a Kempis, of which Eliot states "it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and consolations." Through the timeworn words, Maggie makes out "a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides" (XVIII, 38). It is a Wordsworthian faith which leads Silas to a more all-encompassing faith than he has known when within the Christian fold of his native Lantern Yard. In the case of Savonarola there is his strong burning faith which even then Eliot says is not unwavering -- "for what faith is so?" (XX, 330). The faith of Mordecai is of still another variety, centered upon Daniel Deronda



as his means of conveying his message to the world.

To the average Christian, there is more to be considered than faith alone: "For even as the body without the spirit is dead; so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:26.)

In Janet's Repentance, George Eliot gives Evangelicalism the credit for bringing into existence that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self. Dolly Winthrop may not comprehend the meaning of the I.H.S. on the pulpit-cloth at her church, but she knows full well the importance of faith and good works. Rufus Lyon sees the tenets of Christianity enacted in Felix Holt as he promotes the education of the sons of laborers at Brompton.

In the case of Romola, Savonarola must wrench her from the bond of self-pity in order that she might see the hunger and misery of the streets of plague-ridden Florence. The Dominican tells her that man cannot choose his duties: hers are spelled out for her -- she need only assume them. Dorothea and Lydgate both aspire to improve the human lot without being prompted by a Savonarola -- Dorothea, who finds the answer to all her striving in Christian forgiveness, in "applying the parable of the Good Samaritan," and Lydgate, who sets out to find the answer to life but fails along the way. All in all, in George Eliot's works, as long as the individual is faithful to his own ideal, whether he achieves his goal or not, he is admirable. But at times, there is a cessation of spiritual development, as in Lydgate, which occurs with the abandonment of the ideal.

## CONCLUSION

Through her novels, George Eliot reveals that in spite of her rejection of Christian dogma, she accepts Christian concepts as effective in accomplishing the Good Life. Christian fellowship is extolled in characters as widely separated in doctrine as the humble Dissenter Mr. Jerome of Eliot's early Scenes of Clerical Life to the renowned Savonarola of her more sophisticated work Romola. To Eliot, Christianity may not be the only way for man to learn the lessons of love and duty, but certainly in the wide array of her characters from whom love and duty emanate, one can see that Christianity utilizes the ideal approach. Her characters are guided by Christian beliefs -- not by dogma, but by that inner self which stands ready to face each moral problem as it presents itself. Arthur Donnithorne and Maggie Tulliver suffer, not because they have violated Christian precepts, but because they acknowledge the good life which is also the Christian life. Bulstrode has striven to maintain the good life within the narrow confines of a Dissenting sect; however, his early affiliations have neither blessed nor condemned him, whichever was his due. But the inner spirit dictates for him what is right and what is wrong -- and these are the same values, albeit inherited through Platonism, which are heralded by Christian tradition.

As for confession, George Eliot concedes the importance of the ideal confession: the intercessor may be canonical or uncanonical -- this is beside the point. Again, in baptism, the ideal and not the ritual is important; and in marriage, the fidelity between the two parties supercedes any words of

exhortation which can be pronounced.

George Eliot reveals through her ministers that Christian concepts are spread, not because a man is of certain dogmatic beliefs, but because as a human being he expresses the ideal of which Christ in his love for humanity is the most perfect example. The simple preacher who gives the same message of reward and punishment over and over, because his humanity is accepted and understood by his congregation, is a success at his work.

Faith itself for Eliot takes many forms, but always it is evolved from a search of the inner being for the ideal. And the good works which follow are manifestations which proceed from following the ideal life, the Christ-life.

In her later years, George Eliot stated that "every community met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God) carries me along its main current...." She further confided that others with no definite religious convictions would more beneficially cherish the good within them and be better members of society by conformity based on recognized good in the public belief, though warning at the same time against hypocrisy.<sup>41</sup>

Of Harriet Beecher Stowe she once asked: "Will you not agree with me that there is one comprehensive Church whose fellowship consists in the desire to purify and ennoble humans, and where the best members of all narrower churches may call themselves brother and sister in spite of differences?"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Letters, vol. V, p. 447.

<sup>42</sup>Letters, vol. VI, p. 89.

One cannot concede that George Eliot adhered to agnosticism, defined as the doctrine that God or any first cause is unknown and probably unknowable; for in spite of her scepticism, or possibly because of it, she stands for what Christianity teaches. Her intellectual inquiry strengthened her insight into Christian ideals and prompted her to exemplify these in her characters. While revealing her distaste for Christian dogma, she also praised Christianity in all its diversified forms for its successful attempts to act as a positive force toward good. She only renounced the outward forms of Christianity, and even then she retained them in their ideal state.

Certainly, Eliot did not moralize, did not judge, and did not preach. Instead, she revealed example upon example of the Good Life and in so doing acknowledged that which Plato called the signal of God and Feuerbach called the God in man -- that which in Christian Scriptures is called conscience.

In a letter written just a few days before her death, George Eliot wrote to a friend who was disturbed over someone who had been converted to Catholicism: "There is so much goodness in her that she will have affinity only for the goodness in Catholicism."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, George Eliot seems to have absorbed only that which was good in Evangelicalism, in Strauss, and in Feuerbach. As for her own life, she lived truthfully and honestly within the framework of her own inner creed. Her marriage was real to her because it was within the spirit of the law.

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<sup>43</sup>Letters, vol. VII, p. 346.

From these premises, George Eliot should be considered a liberal Christian who stood for all of the beautiful simplicity of Christianity with none of the dogmatism which man has imposed on that simplicity.

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CHRISTIANITY IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ELIOT

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The purpose of this report is to analyze the writings of George Eliot from the standpoint of the Christian concepts expressed therein in an attempt to prove that in spite of her rejection of Christian dogma, she remained a Christian, and that her writings have a positive Christian influence. The seven-volume edition of The George Eliot Letters, edited by Gordon S. Haight (1954), has been utilized in correlating the mind of George Eliot, the individual, with that revealed in her novels.

A review of some of the salient features of George Eliot's early life is followed by a summary of the two Post-Hegelian works on rational Christianity which the author translated from the German: D. F. Strauss' Leben Jesu and Ludwig Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christentums.

Human fellowship, the human conscience, the sacraments, church and clergy, and faith and good works as exemplified in the eight novels of George Eliot are separately considered in relation to the light which they shed on the Christian concepts of the writer. A number of conclusions are thereby drawn.

George Eliot reveals through her novels that in spite of her rejection of Christian dogma, she accepts Christian concepts as effective in accomplishing the Good Life. Christian fellowship is extolled in characters as widely separated as humble Dissenters and illustrious monks.

To Eliot, Christianity may not be the only way for man to learn the lessons of love and duty, but it represents the ideal approach. In addition, Eliot reveals her characters as guided by the inner spirit toward a sense of value, a concept heralded by



Christianity, albeit inherited through Platonism. In this connection, Eliot concedes the importance of the sacraments of confession and penance, not as rituals, but as ideals. The sacraments of baptism and marriage are also accepted as ideals.

George Eliot shows through her ministers that Christian concepts are spread, not because a man has a certain dogmatic creed, but because as a human being he expresses the ideal of which Christ is the most perfect example. As for faith, Eliot's characters display it in a multitude of forms, but always it is evolved from a search of the inner being for the ideal. And the good works which follow are manifestations which proceed from following the ideal life, the Christ-life.

Certainly, Eliot did not moralize, did not judge, and did not preach. Instead, she revealed example upon example of the Good Life and in so doing acknowledged that which Plato called the signal of God and Feuerbach called the God in man -- that which in Christian Scriptures is called conscience.

From these premises, George Eliot should be considered a liberal Christian who stood for all of the beautiful simplicity of Christianity with none of the dogmatism which man has imposed on that simplicity.